

Desperately seeking Swampy

Ageing rock-stars serenade him. Giggling girls bring him flapjacks. TV producers just love him. Simon Rogers on the making of an eco-celebrity

A lanky, gap-toothed and spectacularly rough-looking 42-year-old is holding forth. Once upon a time Jimmy Pursey was rescued from police stations by columns of angry punks. Now the singer with the recently-reformed Sham 69 – who is better known for modelling ugly for Alexander McQueen – comes in search of the latest spokesman for a generation. And he's recorded a song to prove it.

Sitting in the basement of Manchester's Friends of the Earth offices – headquarters for the campaign to stop Manchester Airport building a second runway – Jimmy writes the words in my notepad, so I won't forget them. He recites them, too. Loudly. "Swampy he went underground, he didn't get lost, he just couldn't be found." He turns round to a woman in a thick woollen hat and scarf. She jumps. "If your heart don't beat you won't see, what Swampy done for you and me."

Scarf woman looks askance. "I fancy Swampy," she says. "I want to mother him." Another looks up: "Do you think he's going to get hurt?"

"But it's not just about Swampy," protests Jimmy. "It's about everybody."

Switch to a scene from *Spartacus* transferred to a court in Manchester. The crowd gathered outside is forbidden to enter. Only the accused, a 23-year-old called Daniel Hooper, is allowed in. And he's not here. The cry goes up: "I'm Daniel Hooper," shouts one. "I'm Daniel," cries another. "No, I'm Daniel," hollers the crowd.

If Daniel had been identified on court documents by his nickname, everybody would still have known who he was, for Swampy is now Britain's celebrity eco-protestor. After his tunnelling exploits at the Fairmile road protest in Devon, he is better known, according to one survey, than either the Tory roads minister or his Labour shadow. He's been targeted by local police and will be guesting in the new series of *Have I Got News For You*. He has modelled Armani suits, writes a column for the *Sunday Mirror* and, last month, pulled a fast one on the national media by declaring he would stand for Parliament against Labour's Graham Stringer (the former leader of Manchester City Council, who supports the airport expansion) to highlight the campaign against Runway 2. It was an April Fool, of course. Swampy doesn't believe in Parliament.

Jimmy and I, plus a photographer and reporter from the *Evening Standard* (Jimmy wants the moment he and Swampy meet to be recorded for posterity) cross Manchester by tram like an expedition. We alight at Altrincham, a short taxi-ride from the Runway 2 site. Jimmy admits to being nervous at meeting the eco-warrior. "As much as he probably wants to know what I'm all about," he says magnanimously, "I want to know what he's all about."

Meeting Swampy – nobody

voice and long legs, he strides across the campsite past bemused protestors more used to their booming coming from the planes which take off loudly over the valley. This is the moment and, cameras ready, he clasps hands with the warrior king.

Swampy is very muddy indeed. The clay is caked like a fake tan over his hands, under his fingernails, in his ears, in his shorn hair with its two dreads. His facial features seem to be made of mud, too, apart from the preternaturally bright eyes. He speaks in the

After his tunnelling exploits at the Fairmile road protest Swampy was targetted by local police. He was also asked to model suits by Armani and to write a column for the 'Sunday Mirror'

calls him Daniel – is like coming across the leader of a band of rebels deep in the jungle. We find a smoking campfire in a clearing in a small wood, and a group of muddy protestors sitting around under treehouses, chatting. A tarpaulin covers the entrance to Swampy's tunnel declared a 'yoghurt-free zone'.

Jimmy shatters the peace. All

hesitant tones of an embarrassed 12-year-old. It's impossible not to warm to him.

Swampy explains why he modelled Armani for *The Express*. "It was just to pay a fine," he says self-consciously, before Jimmy leaps in. "Yeah, I was just asked to walk down a catwalk, that's all," he says. "I just turned around and went... [he gestures]. In other



Swampy, better-known than the roads minister, has modelled Armani, guests on *Have I Got News For You* and duped the national media

words, I didn't give a shit about being here. It was rent money."

The conversation carries on like this with Swampy saying something and Jimmy leaping in after a couple of words with a story about his song or career. Finally, I ask Swampy if I can interview him somewhere else and we walk off to sit on a ledge. Jimmy contents himself with more holding forth, this time to the rest of the camp. Occasionally he looks over, darkly.

The airport protest group consists of several camps spread out over the site of the proposed new runway. Swampy's is called Sir Cliff Richard OBE. The camps look like Natural Trust-approved walkways. Neat steps carved out of the mud spread down a beautifully verdant valley, where a fox's lair is marked off by yellow rope. Airport security guards stand around chatting idly. Protestors say they're one of the main sources for weed.

The camp's already been over-run by the media. Channel 4 has a

documentary crew there filming constantly and camp media coordinator Paul, 'The Bishop', is negotiating rates to appear playing guitar as the sun goes down and penny whistle as it comes up. Standard interview rate for a protestor is £50 – but Channel 4 is only offering Bishop £25.

Life at the site, pending the Airport Authority's eviction, revolves around a simple routine. Swampy sleeps in the tunnel, gets up, has breakfast, digs, has lunch, digs, has tea, digs, has a drink, goes to sleep. Swampy's tunnel itself is a muddy nightmare complete with U-bends full of water to make life difficult for the people who will eventually try to get him and his colleagues out. He spends more than 50 per cent of his time underground, which he doesn't appear to mind. It's warm – a constant 12 degrees.

Fear – except of "very big spiders" – doesn't seem to impinge on his activities, although

"sometimes, you're digging a really awkward stretch of tunnel where you can't see and you're thinking 'what the fuck am I doing?' But I don't panic – you can't get out of a tunnel if you panic."

Swampy's April Fool, which made the front pages of *The Times*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* was, he says, making a point – that voting is a waste of time. He has actually voted once – when he was 18 in the 1992 General Election, for the Natural Law Party: "I thought they were funny and there wasn't a Raving Loony Party where I lived."

He won't be voting this time: he says direct action is more important. Some say the 'don't vote, get up a tree' argument allows politicians to ignore DIY protests; without changing the bigger picture there will always be new roads and runways. Swampy doesn't agree: "They can't ignore us. Do you think our vote's going to give us as much of a voice as

we've got at the moment?"

So what would Swampy World look like? Smaller cities, an agrarian paradise where people grow their own crops and never use cars or planes unless absolutely necessary. People would therefore be doing "proper work, not sitting in front of a computer all day". It's a half-thought-through vision which must seem vaguely possible if you spend as much time with nature as Swampy does.

His idea of a perfect world specifically excludes leaders – although he is a leadership figure himself. He says that's just media hype. "On site there's no leadership," he says. But isn't he treated differently nowadays? "Only by people who've come to live here recently."

There are Swampy groupies. "They bring flapjack up," he says. "And they giggle. But I'm not really interested," he adds quickly. Swampy must be the only eco-protestor to have his partner –

Merry – appear in a tabloid. Not that he's ready for family-style commitment yet. He says he doesn't want his kids growing up with asthma. Kids, Swampy? "Well, I can't imagine myself having kids to be honest," he says. "Not very likely at all. Unless there's an accident."

So, eco-protestors aren't exactly celibates, saving themselves for the campaign. But what about er... privacy? "Oh, we just sleep down the tunnel." Tomorrow's tabloid headline: SWAMPY'S TUNNEL OF LOVE.

After several months of undercover journalists trying to pass themselves off as protesters, Swampy's become an astute judge of the media. He won't do anything for the *News of the World*, *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail* or *The Express*. "I think they're shite," he says.

He insists he wasn't looking for his new role. But it's hard to believe that a 23-year-old with a minor shoplifting record, who once used the false surname of 'Needs' to avoid the police, really doesn't enjoy being seen as a national hero. Doesn't he court publicity? "No! Too much comes in without having to do that. They're phoning all the time – it's too much. They should pick someone else."

But then he accepts the *Have I Got News For You* invite "for a laugh". The programme's producer, Richard Wilson, explains his motivation for having Swampy on the show. "He's a sort of popular folk hero," he says, "and someone who's obviously got a fair bit of nous in dealing with the media."



Wot no vegan choccy cake: eco-protestors get their priorities right

So Jimmy Pursey is not the only celebrity looking for something from Swampy. Millionaire Richard Branson considered naming one of his trains 'Spirit of Swampy'. Swampy says he would like to get him down a tunnel "so we could discuss some of his business activities".

The eco-protestor even has a biographer, local Green Party activist and Parliamentary candidate Spencer Fitz-Gibbon, who insists he's had interest from

at least two major publishers.

"There's the great British underdog angle," says Fitz-Gibbon. "Then there's his general good-humoured way of going about what he does. There's also this changing political climate – he is a major player in that."

The surprising thing about the Runway 2 encampment is that, deep-down, few protestors really seem to expect to win, but they're still going to make the sacrifices – risking their lives down tunnels, in

front of diggers or suspended from trees. They expect to hold up the contractors, cost them an awful lot of money, and make protests a factor in future runway plans. They expect future generations to stop concreting over what's left of Britain. But they don't expect to stop this valley disappearing under a new runway. Fitz-Gibbon openly says what most of the campaigners tacitly admit: "To be honest, we're looking at this campaign stopping Runway 3 rather than Runway 2."

After Manchester, it will be somewhere else: Faslane Peace Camp, maybe, or Guildford's road building scheme. Swampy fancies a holiday in the Orkneys. There's plenty of work for a committed eco-protestor in Britain today.

Meanwhile, the media will keep concentrating on Swampy. Shortly after this interview, he was trailed by Cheshire Police in an unmarked car and arrested for breaking bail conditions intended to keep him away from the camp. He was fined £400 for damaging a fence.

Back at the site, Jimmy can contain himself no more. He bounds noisily up to Swampy, handing him a T-shirt, CD and Sony Discman. He tells him to be careful on *Have I got News...* and then disappears off to his Manchester hotel for the night, back to his pseudo rock-star life.

Swampy's face crinkles into a grin. "Jimmy Pursey," he says. "That's cool."

◆ **Coalition Against Runway 2:** 0161-834 8221. May 1-5, events at the protest site; June 21 solstice walk and rally in Cheshire.



SWAMPY ON...

Voting

"You only get one vote every five years, it doesn't change anything – it's multinational companies that are ruling the world."

The Labour Party

"They want to be tough on crime, that's why they don't support us. Even if that means you've got van-loads of policemen up here going after us

instead of real criminals. What – there isn't crime in Manchester?"

The Cheshire Wildlife Trust

(a local wildlife group that has accused the protestors of ruining the local habitat). "How can they say that when all this is going to be concrete? You can't compare a few tree-houses with that."

The Spice Girls

(Swampy is reported as saying that Spice Girl Geri would be handy on the site). "This

journalist from *The Mirror* kept asking me 'which one do you reckon is the best tunneller?' I said I didn't know who they are. They just printed it anyway!"

The Great Escape (classic British war film where Donald Pleasance et al escape from German PoW camp by tunnelling out and hiding the earth in their trousers). "Excellent film. Yeah. Good tunnel, that."